

# The issue opportunity structure for UK parties: leftist economic agenda vs. British chauvinism

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Building on the tools provided by issue yield theory ([De Sio and Weber 2014](#)), this analysis looks at the data collected by CISE through a CAWI survey launched a few weeks before the British general election. Similarly to what we have recently done before the Dutch parliamentary election last March and the French Presidential election last April, we rely on an innovative measurement of positional issues, which provides a common issue yield index for this type of issues. Positional issues are in general, defined by reference to two rival goals (e.g. progressive vs. traditional morality): the issue yield measure assesses the presence of related strategic issue opportunities for a party. The core dimensions originally developed (for positional issues) in the issue yield model are support (how much a policy is supported in the general public) and within-party agreement (how much it is supported within the party)<sup>1</sup>. The two dimensions correspond to the ideal goal of any party: the ability to keep their existing voter base intact, but with the possibility of reaching out to a much larger potential electorate. This goal is ideally achieved through an emphasis on the issues where the party is internally united, and perhaps many voters outside the party also agree.

Therefore, as regards the next British election, the issue yield index allows us to answer the core question: what is – in electoral terms – the ideal agenda of each party? What selection of issues would provide the best electoral outcome to each party? The issue configuration is the most relevant, it shows the

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<sup>1</sup> In the survey, respondents were asked to express their support on 15 positional issues. For positional issues, a first item requires respondents to choose over the two rival goals (it is a 6-point item, thus also allowing all techniques for classic positional items). Once the goal is selected (e.g. defending traditional morality), respondents are asked to mention (multiple choice) which parties they consider credible to achieve that goal.

best opportunity (and the lowest risk) for each party; we can then compare it with the actual choice of issues that parties emphasized in their campaign, and thus evaluate how strategic was their campaign (which relates to our initial research question). This comparison will first be made in anecdotal terms, while we will address the question in quantitative terms (through the coding of candidate's Twitter communication) in future analyses.

The issue yield for all parties can explain why certain parties are (potentially) more successful than others. For the purposes of this analysis, we have focused on the seven main parties according to the opinion polls: Conservative Party, Labour Party, Liberal Democrats, United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), Scottish National Party (SNP), Greens, Plaid Cymru.

The following tables show issues (and related parties) according to the issue yield index, moving from highest to lowest values. Results show how parties could take advantage by competing on specific issues.

Table 1 shows the results of issue yields for parties on the right: UKIP and Conservatives. First, UKIP scores very high in agreement within its electorate, around 90%, on two migrant-related issues: “restricting access to welfare benefits for immigrants” and “banning the Islamic veil in public spaces”. In addition, the issue related to cultural xenophobia (“requiring foreigners in Britain to fully adapt to British culture”) shows a within-party agreement of 84%, similarly to anti-UE issues as “leaving the European Union” and “ending freedom of movement of people from the EU into Britain” (85%). All these issues show a very high issue yield between 0.90 and 0.84. A second element of the strategic issue opportunities of UKIP is that it can build an original package of issues with good electoral returns: hostility towards migrant and anti-Europe stances, but also economic redistribution (on the reduction of income differences and on the ban of zero hours contracts for worker its issue yield is 0.84 and 0.83, respectively). This result is indeed very similar to what emerged also from the Dutch ([Maggini, De Sio and van Ditmars in this volume](#)) and the French surveys ([Maggini, De Sio and Michel in this volume](#)). Also in these two countries, PVV of Geert Wilders and Marine Le Pen faced a peculiar cross-cutting issue configuration that can be rewarding through an electoral strategy based on “cherry-picking” rather than on traditional left-right ideologies. On the one hand, UKIP is very competitive on ‘demarcationist’ issues ([Kriesi at al. 2006](#)) related to immigration and especially to the European Union; on the other, it is also competitive – to some extent – on traditional economic ‘leftist’ issues related to defence of social protection.

Finally, the maintenance of Britain's nuclear weapons (Trident) shows a good issue yield (0.77) for UKIP.

Regarding the Conservatives, similarly to UKIP, an anti-immigration issue (“restricting access to welfare benefits for immigrants”) provides a very

high electoral return (0.82), but it ranks third and it is lower than the issue yield for UKIP on the same issue. Indeed, we have to stress that the issue yield for a party is not just an absolute value, but it should also be considered in relation to the issue yield of other parties. That is, we must look at the issue yield rank. In this regard, the other aforementioned anti-UE and anti-migration issues show high levels of within-party agreement (between 75% and 80%) and good issue yields (between 0.61 and 0.69), but the latter rank after UKIP's issue yields. The same applies to the maintenance of Britain's nuclear weapons (Trident). All this means that UKIP on such issues seems to be better positioned than Conservatives from a strategic standpoint. Nevertheless, party size should be taken into account, too: Conservatives can be still competitive because of the first-past-the-post electoral system, that is, voters with anti-immigrants and anti-UE attitudes might decide at the end to vote for them rather than for UKIP for strategic reasons. Finally, it is worth noting that no traditional economic liberal issue provides a good electoral return for Conservatives. Conversely (and surprisingly), an issue like "raising taxes and spending more on health and social services" shows an agreement within the party of 74% (and an issue yield of 0.60).

Table 2 presents issue yield indices for Liberal Democrats, Labour, Plaid Cymru, SNP, Greens and specifically which issues may provide the best electoral returns for parties competing on the political space from the left (SNP, Labour, Plaid Cymru) to the liberal-democratic centre.

First, all these parties clearly share a similar issue area of competition: indeed, traditional left-wing economic issues (reducing income inequalities, scrapping or reducing the cost of university tuition fees, banning zero hours contracts for workers, investing more public money to build affordable homes, raising taxes and spending more on health and social services, nationalizing Britain's railways, increasing minimum wage) are all issues that could provide a very good electoral return, having high issue yields ( $\geq 0.67$ ). On the other hand, Greens, Liberal Democrats and SNP are united by stances towards Europe: for Lib-Dem issues like staying in the EU and in the European Single Market provide high issue yields: 0.76 and 0.79, respectively (ranking first and second). Similarly, for Greens staying in the EU and in the European Single Market provide issue yields of 0.70 (ranking second and third, respectively). Finally, for SNP staying in the EU and in the European Single Market provide issue yields of 0.66 and 0.79 (ranking first and third, respectively).

On such issues, Labour Party shows a much lower issue yield. Hence, it is reasonable from a strategic standpoint that Labour does not emphasize Brexit-related issues, focusing more on traditional left-wing issues on which it can have a good electoral return. Nevertheless, as we have seen, on left-wing economic issues it has to face a strong competition, with other parties (especially SNP and Plaid Cymru) ranking better than Labour in terms of issue yield.

Table 1. Traditional ideology or “cherry-picking”? The issue packages that characterize the electorate of each party (Conservatives, UKIP), and the electoral potential of these packages

Party	Statement	General agreement	Agreement within party	Issue yield	Issue yield rank
Conservatives	Restrict access to welfare benefits for immigrants	76%	88%	0.82	3
Conservatives	Ban the Islamic veil in public spaces	63%	80%	0.69	2
Conservatives	Leave the European Union	54%	77%	0.65	2
Conservatives	Maintain Britain’s nuclear weapons (Trident)	63%	77%	0.64	3
Conservatives	Require foreigners in Britain to fully adapt to British culture	65%	77%	0.64	2
Conservatives	End freedom of movement of people from the EU into Britain	54%	75%	0.61	2
Conservatives	Raise taxes and spend more on health and social services	72%	74%	0.60	9
Conservatives	Ban zero hours contracts for workers	79%	74%	0.59	9
Conservatives	Increase the minimum wage	80%	73%	0.58	9
Conservatives	Do not allow Scotland to vote in another referendum on independence	54%	70%	0.54	4
Conservatives	Invest more public money to build affordable homes	72%	67%	0.49	9
Conservatives	Keep the law that allows gay marriages	73%	67%	0.49	9
Conservatives	Expand the provision of grammar schools	53%	66%	0.47	3
Conservatives	Leave the European Single Market	43%	63%	0.43	3
Conservatives	Allow the expansion of fracking to produce more oil and gas	50%	60%	0.38	2
Conservatives	Reduce income differences	71%	56%	0.33	9
Conservatives	Scrap or reduce the cost of university tuition fees	70%	52%	0.26	9
Conservatives	Keep Britain’s railways in private	35%	51%	0.23	1
UKIP	Restrict access to welfare benefits for immigrants	76%	90%	0.90	1
UKIP	Ban the Islamic veil in public spaces	63%	89%	0.88	1
UKIP	Increase the minimum wage	80%	85%	0.84	3
UKIP	Leave the European Union	54%	85%	0.84	1
UKIP	End freedom of movement of people from the EU into Britain	54%	85%	0.84	1
UKIP	Reduce income differences	71%	85%	0.84	2
UKIP	Require foreigners in Britain to fully adapt to British culture	65%	84%	0.83	1

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Party	Statement	General agreement	Agreement within party	Issue yield	Issue yield rank
UKIP	Ban zero hours contracts for workers	79%	84%	0.83	4
UKIP	Maintain Britain's nuclear weapons (Trident)	63%	79%	0.77	1
UKIP	Raise taxes and spend more on health and social services	72%	72%	0.70	2
UKIP	Nationalize Britain's railways	65%	70%	0.69	6
UKIP	Leave the European Single Market	43%	70%	0.69	1
UKIP	Keep the law that allows gay marriages	73%	69%	0.67	7
UKIP	Scrap or reduce the cost of university tuition fees	70%	69%	0.67	8
UKIP	Invest more public money to build affordable homes	72%	67%	0.65	8
UKIP	Do not allow Scotland to vote in another referendum on independence	54%	59%	0.56	3
UKIP	Expand the provision of grammar schools	53%	57%	0.55	1
UKIP	Prohibit the use of fracking to produce more oil and gas	50%	56%	0.53	5

Again, Labour could overcome these difficulties appealing to a strategic vote because of the first-past-the-post electoral system.

Regarding welfare chauvinism, Plaid Cymru and Lib-Dem show high issue yields, being more similar to right-wing parties than to centre-left parties in this regard.

As far as libertarian social issues are concerned, “keeping gay marriage” shows a high issue yield only for SNP (0.83, ranking first), Greens (0.75, ranking second) and Liberal-Democrats (0.68, ranking sixth).

Finally, as predictable, SNP and Greens shows high issue yields on their core issues, that is, for SNP “allowing another Referendum for Scotland’s independence” (0.79, ranking first) and for Greens “prohibiting the use of fracking to produce more oil and gas” (0.67, ranking second). It is worth noting that on this environmental issue the SNP is better positioned than the Greens, with an issue yield of 0.69.

To sum up, the analysis of the strategic issue opportunity structure shows that Labour is competitive only on traditional economic left-wing issues, which are all issues that can provide a good electoral return to several parties, whereas the same pattern does not occur as regards right-wing economic issues. In this regard, our data confirm the findings presented by [Emanuele in this volume](#): in the United Kingdom, an economic left-wing orientation can

Table 2. Traditional ideology or “cherry-picking”? The issue packages that characterize the electorate of each party (Labour, Liberal Democrats, SNP, Greens, Plaid Cymru) and the electoral potential of these packages.

Party	Statement	General agreement	Agreement within party	Issue yield	Issue yield rank
Greens	Reduce income differences	71%	89%	0.89	1
Greens	Ban zero hours contracts for workers	79%	87%	0.86	2
Greens	Increase the minimum wage	80%	87%	0.86	2
Greens	Scrap or reduce the cost of university tuition fees	70%	84%	0.84	2
Greens	Invest more public money to build affordable homes	72%	84%	0.84	2
Greens	Nationalize Britain’s railways	65%	76%	0.75	2
Greens	Keep the law that allows gay marriages	73%	76%	0.75	2
Greens	Keep Britain in the European Single Market	57%	71%	0.70	3
Greens	Keep Britain in the European Union	46%	71%	0.70	2
Greens	Raise taxes and spend more on health and social services	72%	68%	0.67	6
Greens	Prohibit the use of fracking to produce more oil and gas	50%	68%	0.67	2
Greens	Allow freedom of movement of people from the EU into Britain	46%	61%	0.59	3
Greens	Restrict access to welfare benefits for immigrants	76%	58%	0.56	7
Greens	Maintain Britain’s nuclear weapons (Trident)	63%	58%	0.56	7
Greens	Allow Scotland to vote in another referendum on independence	46%	55%	0.53	2
Greens	Ban the Islamic veil in public spaces	63%	55%	0.53	7
Greens	Require foreigners in Britain to fully adapt to British culture	65%	55%	0.53	7
Greens	Limit the provision of grammar schools	47%	53%	0.51	3
Labour	Increase the minimum wage	80%	85%	0.79	6
Labour	Scrap or reduce the cost of university tuition fees	70%	84%	0.77	3
Labour	Nationalize Britain’s railways	65%	80%	0.73	3
Labour	Reduce income differences	71%	80%	0.72	6
Labour	Ban zero hours contracts for workers	79%	79%	0.71	7
Labour	Invest more public money to build affordable homes	72%	78%	0.69	6
Labour	Raise taxes and spend more on health and social services	72%	78%	0.69	3

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Party	Statement	General agreement	Agreement within party	Issue yield	Issue yield rank
Labour	Keep the law that allows gay marriages	73%	74%	0.63	8
Labour	Keep Britain in the European Single Market	57%	69%	0.57	5
Labour	Limit the provision of grammar schools	47%	62%	0.47	6
Labour	Restrict access to welfare benefits for immigrants	76%	61%	0.46	9
Labour	Keep Britain in the European Union	46%	60%	0.45	4
Labour	Prohibit the use of fracking to produce more oil and gas	50%	59%	0.43	7
Labour	Allow freedom of movement of people from the EU into Britain	46%	59%	0.43	5
Labour	Require foreigners in Britain to fully adapt to British culture	65%	55%	0.37	9
Labour	Allow Scotland to vote in another referendum on independence	46%	52%	0.34	5
Labour	Allow the Islamic veil in public spaces	37%	51%	0.32	1
Labour	Maintain Britain's nuclear weapons (Trident)	63%	51%	0.32	8
Liberal Democrats	Increase the minimum wage	80%	82%	0.80	5
Liberal Democrats	Ban zero hours contracts for workers	79%	82%	0.80	6
Liberal Democrats	Keep Britain in the European Single Market	57%	80%	0.79	2
Liberal Democrats	Reduce income differences	71%	77%	0.76	5
Liberal Democrats	Keep Britain in the European Union	46%	77%	0.76	1
Liberal Democrats	Invest more public money to build affordable homes	72%	75%	0.73	5
Liberal Democrats	Restrict access to welfare benefits for immigrants	76%	75%	0.73	5
Liberal Democrats	Scrap or reduce the cost of university tuition fees	70%	75%	0.73	5
Liberal Democrats	Nationalize Britain's railways	65%	73%	0.71	4
Liberal Democrats	Maintain Britain's nuclear weapons (Trident)	63%	72%	0.70	2
Liberal Democrats	Keep the law that allows gay marriages	73%	70%	0.68	6
Liberal Democrats	Raise taxes and spend more on health and social services	72%	70%	0.68	5

Party	Statement	General agreement	Agreement within party	Issue yield	Issue yield rank
Liberal Democrats	Allow freedom of movement of people from the EU into Britain	46%	68%	0.65	2
Liberal Democrats	Require foreigners in Britain to fully adapt to British culture	65%	56%	0.53	8
Liberal Democrats	Ban the Islamic veil in public spaces	63%	56%	0.53	8
Liberal Democrats	Prohibit the use of fracking to produce more oil and gas	50%	54%	0.50	6
Liberal Democrats	Allow Scotland to vote in another referendum on independence	46%	52%	0.48	4
Liberal Democrats	Limit the provision of grammar schools	47%	52%	0.48	5
Plaid Cymru	Nationalize Britain's railways	65%	100%	1.00	1
Plaid Cymru	Scrap or reduce the cost of university tuition fees	70%	91%	0.91	1
Plaid Cymru	Invest more public money to build affordable homes	72%	91%	0.91	1
Plaid Cymru	Ban zero hours contracts for workers	79%	91%	0.91	1
Plaid Cymru	Increase the minimum wage	80%	91%	0.91	1
Plaid Cymru	Raise taxes and spend more on health and social services	72%	82%	0.82	1
Plaid Cymru	Reduce income differences	71%	82%	0.82	3
Plaid Cymru	Restrict access to welfare benefits for immigrants	76%	82%	0.82	4
Plaid Cymru	Keep the law that allows gay marriages	73%	73%	0.72	4
Plaid Cymru	Leave the European Union	54%	64%	0.63	3
Plaid Cymru	Maintain Britain's nuclear weapons (Trident)	63%	64%	0.63	4
Plaid Cymru	Do not allow Scotland to vote in another referendum on independence	54%	64%	0.63	1
Plaid Cymru	Ban the Islamic veil in public spaces	63%	64%	0.63	3
Plaid Cymru	Prohibit the use of fracking to produce more oil and gas	50%	55%	0.54	4
Plaid Cymru	Require foreigners in Britain to fully adapt to British culture	65%	55%	0.54	6



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Party	Statement	General agreement	Agreement within party	Issue yield	Issue yield rank
Plaid Cymru	Expand the provision of grammar schools	53%	55%	0.54	2
Plaid Cymru	Leave the European Single Market	43%	55%	0.54	2
Plaid Cymru	Allow freedom of movement of people from the EU into Britain	46%	55%	0.54	4
SNP	Keep the law that allows gay marriages	73%	83%	0.83	1
SNP	Ban zero hours contracts for workers	79%	83%	0.83	3
SNP	Keep Britain in the European Single Market	57%	80%	0.79	1
SNP	Allow Scotland to vote in another referendum on independence	46%	80%	0.79	1
SNP	Reduce income differences	71%	77%	0.76	4
SNP	Increase the minimum wage	80%	77%	0.76	7
SNP	Scrap or reduce the cost of university tuition fees	70%	73%	0.73	6
SNP	Raise taxes and spend more on health and social services	72%	70%	0.69	4
SNP	Invest more public money to build affordable homes	72%	70%	0.69	7
SNP	Prohibit the use of fracking to produce more oil and gas	50%	70%	0.69	1
SNP	Nationalize Britain's railways	65%	70%	0.69	5
SNP	Keep Britain in the European Union	46%	67%	0.66	3
SNP	Allow freedom of movement of people from the EU into Britain	46%	67%	0.66	1
SNP	Ban the Islamic veil in public spaces	63%	60%	0.59	4
SNP	Dismantle Britain's nuclear weapons (Trident)	37%	60%	0.59	1
SNP	Limit the provision of grammar schools	47%	57%	0.55	1
SNP	Require foreigners in Britain to fully adapt to British culture	65%	57%	0.55	5
SNP	Restrict access to welfare benefits for immigrants	76%	57%	0.55	8

be detected, with the only relevant exception of a largely supported welfare chauvinist goal. On anti-migration and anti-UE issues, Conservatives can get a good electoral return, competing on the same issues with the UKIP. The latter, nevertheless, has a much smaller size according to the polls; hence, Conservatives can be strategically rewarded by voters with anti-immigrants and anti-UE attitudes because of the first-past-the-post electoral system.

At this point, it emerges clearly the most interesting result: the two mainstream British parties of the left and of the right (i.e. Labour and Conservatives) do not show a strategic issue opportunity structure based on the same dimension of competition. Indeed, Labour can be competitive on the economic left-right dimension, whereas Conservatives can be competitive on the integration/demarcation dimension. In other words, Labour and Conservatives have to play in different playing fields. The electoral outcome depends on whether the Labour party will be able to exploit this favourable window of opportunity for an economic leftist agenda, or whether, instead, the Conservatives will be able to shift the public attention to “demarcationist” issues.

Finally, the SNP is very well positioned from a strategic point of view: it is competitive on progressive issues related to the economic left-right dimension, on social libertarian and environmental issues, on pro-Europe stances and on its core issue related to the Scotland’s independence. The latter point is, of course, also its weakness, being SNP rooted only in Scotland.

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